

the space station Mir. Whether they will attempt to spend an entire year in space remains to be seen.

As always, records exist to be broken.

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Medicine in the USSR

TO THE EDITOR: As Russian-speaking physicians who have just returned from seven months in the Soviet Union, we read Dr Friedenbergs overview of Soviet health care¹ with great interest. While we can corroborate many of the author's observations, we think that his conclusions understate the sorry condition of Soviet medicine.

There is ample documentation in the Western literature of the USSR's rising infant² and overall³ mortality rates, of the decline in spending on health care that by one estimate now amounts to just 2% of the gross national product,⁴ and of the technologic backwardness that characterizes most hospitals and clinics.⁴ To this we would add that dissatisfaction with the poor quality and corruption of the health care system is widespread among both patients and physicians.

While the illegal practice of payment on the side to physi-

cians and nurses—required simply to have one's operation done or one's medication given—is so prevalent that it has recently been acknowledged in the Soviet press (*Izvestia*, Sep 24, 1987), worse yet is the fact that many people are distrustful of the system at any price, official or unofficial. Physicians themselves complain about policies that stress quantity, not quality, low prestige and pay, and lack of professional autonomy. Professional input in health policy and public health is also lacking, as may be judged by recent measures that mandate human immunodeficiency virus testing for many groups and prison terms for those who deliberately expose another to the virus (*Izvestia*, Aug 26, 1987).

We commend Dr Friedenbergs on his accurate reporting of many facets of the Soviet health care system and would emphasize the abysmally low level of care that is a fact of life for Soviet citizens.

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